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SUBJECT: (C) ELECTIONS SNAPSHOT: DISARRAY ON ALL SIDES

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. 1.(C) Summary: Congo(B) will hold a Presidential election on July 12 for a seven-year Presidential term. With the filing deadline June 12, only Mathias Dzon has filed formal papers as a candidate from the opposition. In the non-Sassou camp, it is difficult to determine which of the possible candidates are genuinely of the opposition and which are intended (by Sassou) to pull support away from the two major opposing candidates (Mathias Dzon and Ange-Edouard Pongui). Incumbent President Denis Sassou Nguesso is waiting until the last minute to declare his own candidacy, but there is no doubt he will, by the end of next week. Sassou and his supporters are organizing a media-blitzing bandwagon, at the cost of tension within the Presidential movement, as his backers fight (literally) to take first prize as the most passionate partisan on his side. Sassou Nguesso is going to win, probably in the first round, in an election which will be attacked by the opposition as neither free nor fair. Worries about security prior to, during, and after the elections are mostly inchoate.
END SUMMARY.

2.(c) Pre-electoral activity is rising rapidly, at least in Brazzaville, as both the so-called Presidential Majority and the divided opposition maneuver. This essay is intended to convey the atmosphere rather than the details, which we will address once the candidates have all announced and the campaign begins. As we understand it now, the filing deadline is June 12; the official campaign period begins June 20 and concludes July 10; and the election will be held on July 12. If necessary (fifty percent required to win) a runoff will be held either July 26 or August 2, and the new President will be sworn in on August 15, Congo's national day.

THE PRESIDENTIAL SIDE: Jockeying for the next Sassou government

¶3. (c) The most notable fact about the Sassou "non-campaign" is how active it is, despite the fact that he has not yet declared himself a candidate. This week, Sassou's actual party, the Congolese Labor Party (PCT), held a "central committee" meeting (vestiges of the PCT's old days, when it was the sole party and organized along Marxist lines), having realized that they couldn't very well endorse their candidate if they didn't hold a meeting. They are competing with the larger pro-Sassou grouping, the "Presidential Majority" (RMP) made up of most of the parties represented in the legislative bodies, which has already declared itself pro-Sassou. For months, various "community organizations" have been holding press conferences to declare their support for Sassou and to appeal to him to run for another term. In the last two weeks, however, these "organizations" have taken on a much more personalized tone, i.e. being overtly identified with one or another of Sassou's ministers or officials. The "Jean-Dominique Okemba Association" was featured today (Okemba being the National Security Advisor) with a call by its young members to support Sassou. Another organization has popped up recently, the "National Initiative

for Peace (INP)," backed by one of Sassou's government ministers who seems to have decided to arrest his declining influence within the "Presidential Majority" (RMP) through public declarations of support for Sassou. This led, a few days ago, to the spectacle, not reported in the media but widely discussed in Brazzaville, of the two senior members of the National Assembly (one of them a Minister) who head respectively the INP and the RMP duking it out over a matter of which organization's banner would be within the President's view at a public rally.

4.(C) One of our contacts, who was a young man at Sassou's side (a Cobra, probably) during the civil war of 1997 told us that that this election is a game with the highest stakes there are: livelihood. Given that oil (and wood) are the only productive parts of the private sector, it is only natural that those who practice politics want to maintain their positions, or enhance them by getting closer to the source, in this case Denis Sassou Nguesso. He noted this was also the cause of all the conflicts that Congo(B) has known since independence. Our contact is supporting Sassou this time, but he hints he will branch off a year or two after the election, probably to pursue the highest office himself. There are quite a few like him, who realize that Sassou is aging and that there is an increasing chance the top job will fall vacant during or at the end of the seven year term under discussion.

15. (C) Sassou himself has been extraordinarily active. He has spent a great deal of time outside Brazzaville, on a long tour to the north and twice to the south, cutting ribbons, upbraiding local officials and government contractors for their failings in implementing his "great works" program, and accepting envelopes of cash campaign contributions from his supporters. His campaign has two clear themes: Peace and Development (Great Works). He is working to convince Congolese that his presence at the helm of affairs is necessary to avoid a repeat of the disastrous bloody civil wars that have cost Congo so much. And he is highlighting all the big buildings and public works that have come into being in the past few years (but most of which are behind schedule and not completed). There is a new website (denissassou.com). On June 6, Sassou is holding something they are calling a "MEGA MEETING" at which his new French-authored campaign biography will be released. The t-shirts are being distributed this afternoon. In contrast, a couple of opposition rallies outside Brazzaville were blocked in May as "threats to public order."

OPPOSITION: DIVIDED AND IMPOTENT

16. (C) From the opposition side, we expect as many as eight candidates, including two from the three factions of the UPADS. (UPADS is the only other party, aside from the PCT, ever to govern this country. It was created by Pascal Lissouba, went into hibernation when Lissouba went into exile in 1997, and was revived when its members began returning to Brazzaville from France in 2006-2007). As of June 5, only Mathias Dzon (UPRN - newly-created party) has filed his papers, and there is some doubt as to how many more will actually file. Dzon retired at the end of 2008 from a Sassou-appointed position as National Director of the reserve bank for central Africa; earlier, he was Sassou's finance minister. He is, however, the most vocal and best-organized of the candidates. The other major opposition candidate, Ange-Edouard Poungui, is badly hampered by infighting in his divided UPADS party. There is also a possibility that he could be declared ineligible, based on the two-year in-Congo residence requirement, based on how much time he has spent in France lately. One of today's newspapers reports a press conference yesterday in which the titular head of the 18-party opposition grouping reports that several candidates whose parties are members of the opposition coalition will run; we wonder how a coalition could hang together if their heads are all running. There is another batch of opposition figures (probably not very well organized in party structure) but including a close affiliate of Mathias Dzon's who are going toward a boycott or further, saying, with a rather menacing tone, that if there's not a free and fair election, there'll be no election at all - even for Sassou. This group is more strongly represented in Paris than in Brazzaville.

17. (C) The opposition has let itself be captured by the procedural "texts" surrounding the election. With the election five weeks away, they are still arguing that it should be postponed until a new voter census can be arranged, until a new board is appointed at the National Elections Commission (CONEL), and until several other conditions are met. They are right: The government and the Sassou-stacked CONEL have played fast and loose with the procedure, and this election is going to take place in an atmosphere far from consensual. But we also suspect that this emphasis on the "texts" and the "preconditions for consensus" are at least in part a way for hard-liners (or even Sassou sympathizers, or even Dzon sympathizers, if Machiavelli is your cup of tea) to trap some or all of the opposition into an inevitable logic of boycott, thus narrowing the field. So far, they have not begun to present a coherent "anti-Sassou" platform or a vision as to how they would run it any differently. This may be a consequence of the fact that everybody knows what's wrong here, but no one sees any politician who could (a) beat Sassou, and (b) behave differently if he won.

18. (C) Sassou has spent the last five years practicing the adage "keep your friends close, and your enemies closer" by neutralizing or co-opting all the major figures of the previous era of Congolese politics. As of this week, the Kolelas clan is holding meetings in the Pool to muster support for Sassou; Kolelas fils is a minister in the government. Yoachim Yhombi-Opango is silent, tending toward Sassou, and living happily in Brazzaville where he recently celebrated his seventieth birthday. Pascal Lissouba is ill, in France, and has not been heard to say a word for several years. Even the troublesome Frederick (Pasteur Ntumi) Bitsangou is silent.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT - OR LACK THEREOF

9.(c) The EU Commission representative was refused his requests for funding for election support (for civil society), and the request for observers was made so late by the Congolese government that it would have been an uphill struggle to get a mission on Brussels' agenda, even had the Commission been sympathetic. (We wonder whether the French had a hand in that reticence; President Sarkozy's visit here, despite his statements about staying out of Congolese politics, is viewed as virtually an endorsement of a new Sassou term.) We expect the AU will field an observation mission, as will the international organization of "francophonie." The only/only on-the-ground pre-electoral support from outside is two consultants who are here under UNDP auspices to work with the National Election Commission on support for civil society. They arrived this week, while CONEL/government preparations for this election began last November.

SECURITY

10.(c) There is a feeling of unease among the Brazzaville population, but it is based on history rather than indicators. Presidential politics have been at the heart of most of Congo(B)'s violence and civil war since independence. Many foreign residents and entities, including embassies, are jamming the Air France flight full with dependents, starting now, to take early vacations this year rather than waiting for any heat to begin when the campaign begins in earnest. We expect that the government will keep a tight hold on public meetings, rallies, or civil disobedience. There is no/no specific information that militias are forming up, that arms are being readied, or that any of the factions plans to take it to the mattresses this time. We will of course keep a close eye on the security situation as it heats up, as it certainly will.

EASTHAM